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FOLLOWE

FROM THE EDITOR

WHAT A MESS

THE BRASS AT NAVAL AIR STATION JACKSONVILLE ISN'T VERY HAPPY WITH THE PRESS THEY'VE BEEN receiving lately. A couple of environmental boo-boos involving a jet fuel pipeline leak and the release of trace amounts of cancer-causing cadmium into the St. Johns River have made interesting reading over the last several weeks.

Earlier this month, we reported that the jet fuel conduit from NAS Jax to Cecil Field that ruptured in 1989 was finally nearing the clean-up phase. This leak allowed the pipe to pump an unknown (but certainly very large) quantity of fuel into the ground near the intersection of 103rd Street and I-295 on Jacksonville's Westside. The Navy recently bought land near the rupture so it could dig out the contaminated soil and try and clean the underlying groundwater. While the Navy will spend a lot of money to clean up the site, at least one local environmentalist, John Austin, has raised important questions about the structural integrity of the rest of the pipeline — i.e. if it broke once, how can we be sure it won't break again?

Just as the Navy's PR people were batting back the pipeline story, the Florida Times-Union reported that some cadmium-tainted water had been dumped into stormwater ditches on base and allowed to flow into the St. Johns River.

The environment is a touchy subject on military bases in Jacksonville and around the nation. The U.S. fought three big wars and a couple of smaller ones before anyone cared about the millions of gallons of fuel, oil, paint, solvents, and human waste that were poured into the holes and ditches on bases from Mayport to Monterey. To its credit, today's military is quite careful when disposing of its own waste, and diligent in cleaning up the mess others left behind.

That's probably why the cadmium story really got under the Navy's skin (see NAS Capt. R.D. Whitmire's response in the July 23 T-U). World War II-era pipelines sometimes break, and there's not a lot the Navy can do about that. But the unintentional release of a little cadmium into the St. Johns River is a drop in the proverbial bucket when compared to the tons of fertilizer, oil, gasoline, mercury and, yes, cadmium the city of Jacksonville pours into the river every time it rains. The Navy's contribution to river pollution is microscopic when compared to the city as a whole. And Jacksonville has only itself — and its reluctant politicians — to blame for the lack of attention given to the St. Johns River's greatest threat — stormwater runoff.

For many years city officials have known that the historic improvements in the quality of the St. Johns River are quickly being undermined by the crap that washes off lawns, into streets, down storm drains and into the river in an uninterrupted torrent. The surface water may be relatively clean, river watchers point out, but the pollutants settling on the river bottom have formed a carcinogenic layer cake that is the foundation of the river's threatened ecosystem.

We have the know-how to solve the stormwater problem. The idea of a stormwater utility — a program to capture and treat most storm runoff before it enters the river — has been kicking around for years. What we've lacked so far is the stomach to pay for it.

Word is a new, more detailed stormwater utility plan is being drafted by Jacksonville City Councilman Jim Overton for presentation to the council sometime this fall. Meanwhile, representatives of the St. Johns River Water Management District have been meeting with city Public Works Director Sam Mousa in hopes that his input will help sell the plan to Mayor Delaney — whose "no new taxes" pledge could be an unfortunate stumbling block.

In his letter to the editor, Capt. Whitmire challenged "the implication that Navy officials have failed to honor certain environmental stewardship commitments." The cadmium problem has been dealt with, he said. "The U.S. Navy...is dedicated to its environmental responsibilities."

We wish Jacksonville could say the same. ♦

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